Why are we using public deliberation?

Why are we using public deliberation as an approach to discuss facts and values and offer suggestions to the Bloomington Community Orchard Board of Directors as they determine how to distribute the fruit? Because it is critical to the well-being of the Orchard to hear your voices about this topic.

To understand more clearly, let’s get some history, written by Chair of the Orchard Board Amy Roche:

The question of “Who gets the fruit?” was first brought up by workday volunteers in the spring of 2010, a few months after the Orchard was formed. It hadn’t previously come up for any of the first orchard leaders beyond the original intent of donating a portion of the harvest to the Hoosier Hills Food Bank Garden and Gleaning Program. That intention remains. Since that initial inquiry, the question has become by far the most common question asked of us—at workdays, at tabling events, at presentations, in classes, at planting days and celebrations.

For months, we dodged the question by either saying we didn’t know, or saying our personal opinions, but after a while it became clear we had to have some uniform response. We decided that it made sense as a community organization to ask the questioners what they thought should be done with the fruit, and from there began the sharing of many interesting community opinions. When pressed to answer, many were speechless as we were at first, or blurted out some predictable answer—and then, with a little reflection, would start to speak what I came to see as socio-economic mores—ruling viewpoints that they didn’t seem to realize they had inherited until they took the time to think about it. Many times, people left the conversation in a state of indecision. I thought that was a beautiful impact for the Orchard to have on our town: getting people to question their preconceived notions about class, need, entitlement, justice, food equity, property, theft, respect, giving. The idea of giving the fruit away to anyone for free was challenging to most, but not to those of us who had started the organization.

After more months of answering the question with a question, and lots of casual conversations in and out of board meetings about what we could do with the fruit, such as organize harvest festivals, make value-added products as demos or for sale, have tastings, etc.–plus a sort of reckoning that this one site’s fruit isn’t the only way the Orchard shares fruit. We teach, we provide others hands-on experience, we propagate and give away saplings and show others how to plant and cultivate them (and with specific populations through Mother Hubbard’s Cupboard, for example), some members of leadership called for us to actually answer the question.

Most leaders/board members felt the decision needed to be strongly informed by the community. So, we held our first Community Forum as part of the Annual Meeting in January 2012. It was very loosely structured: a wide-open public comment session with no particular direction. The results of the January forum were ambiguous.

Meanwhile, this spring, strawberries fruited heavily in the Orchard and the need for a Community Forum for fruit distribution was brought to the surface again. Over the summer, we decided to work with Indiana University’s Political and Civic Engagement Program (PACE) to research what community members were thinking about the topic of fruit distribution and to create an informed public deliberation process to gather community input.

It is important that while we are trying to come to a decision point about the fruit harvest, this Community Forum is largely about the process of exploring the concerns, commitments, and motivations that lead people to suggest given methods. The Orchard Board will make a public statement about the results of today’s forum at the Annual Meeting in January.